

Creativity

Philosophers and educationists have asked: What is creativity? In fact, it is hard to define it. Any definition must include the essential element of novelty. During the creative act, people manipulate external objects or symbols to produce an uncommon event unusual to them or environment.

Many people confuse creativity with verbal skills or quickness of mind. These attributes are pointers to creativity rather than creativity itself.

Creativity may be considered from the standpoint of the people who create, their attitudes, habits and values. It may be explained by a way of the mental processes by which creativity comes into play. It may be understood in terms of its products: theories, inventions, poems, paintings, etc. Finally, creativity may be analysed in the light of the environmental and cultural influences.

The highest kind of creativity is surely that which shatters the clouds of custom, and extends the possibilities of thought and perception. Creativity largely springs from the re-arrangement of existing knowledge, a re-arrangement that is itself an addition to knowledge.

Unfortunately, the price of originality is the hostility of one's conservative, conformist contemporaries. The Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (1473-1543) and the Italian physicist Galileo (1564-1642) were denounced as blasphemers; the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was burnt as heretic; the English scientist Charles Darwin (1809-1882) earned the wrath of the clergy; and the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was condemned. All of them had suffered because they had something new to offer.

Originality alone, however, does not make an act or an idea creative. Relevance is a factor to be reckoned with. The creative act is always a response to a particular challenge. It must solve, or in some way clarify, the situation that has caused it to arise. An idea is creative not only because it is original, but also because it achieves something that is appropriate to a given situation.

Creative thought is innovative, exploratory and venturesome. It is impatient of convention. Nothing creative is cautious, methodical and conservative. Creativity absorbs the new into the already known, and expands existing categories. Creative thought is iconoclastic; the non-creative thought is dogmatic. In the words of the Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), "Some men see things as they are, any day, why?! I dream of things that never were and say, why not?!"

Creativity involves certain mental abilities, such as the ability to change one's approach to a problem, to produce ideas that are extraordinary and unusual, to see beyond the immediate situation, and to redefine the problem.

Some jobs offer more scope for creativity than others. Teaching is a more creative work than hiking, because it requires more originality in thought and action. There are uncreative people. The genius and the average person seem to have little in common; yet the difference between them is one of quantity. In the genius, imagination, energy and persistence may be more highly developed. All sane individuals are creative in diverse ways and to different degrees.

Creativity calls for persistence and patience, since it must be sustained over long periods of time and in the face of formidable obstacles. Lying on his back on a scaffold, the

Italian painter Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475-1564) took seven years to paint the Sistine Chapel in the papal palace. "Paradise Lost" cost the English poet John Milton (1608-1674) his eyes.

The creative persons are skeptical of accepted ideas and assumptions. Their skepticism liberates them from conventional beliefs, while their predilection for new ideas prepares them for the intellectual risks of creative discovery. The French philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650) threw open the flood-gates of modern philosophy, no less than those of modern science, by his methodology of putting everything in doubt.

Above all, creativity implies non-conformity, because conformity inhabits the traits that make for creativity. As a rule, the conformists are less intelligent than the independent-minded persons, less intellectually flexible and less prolific in ideas. They are more dependent on others and less confident of themselves. They are often rigid and authoritarian in personality. They seek security and acceptance and shun novelty.

The independent-minded persons are more capable of creative achievement, because they maintain a balance between group-centredness and self-centredness. They are open to experience. The creative persons have a sense of mission, even of destiny, but certainly they are not megalomaniac!

William Al-Sharif

- *Published in 1988*